How to safely help out in your community

Wanting to help in a crisis is a natural reaction.

You might already be helping your neighbour by buying them groceries or lending a hand to an isolated family member. You might have joined or want to join groups on social media, or informal community groups that have come together to support vulnerable members within your community. These types of voluntary work are known as 'informal volunteering'.

During these challenging times, it is important that we take care of ourselves and others. Whether you are helping out a neighbour or joining an online group to assist your local community, it is important to follow official government guidelines at all times.

> Our collective aim is to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We are therefore urging people to exert caution when embarking on informal volunteering activities. Individuals need to consider issues of privacy and self-care and avoid putting themselves and others in the community at risk.
>
> This means adhering to recommended physical distancing guidelines and other official guidance as it emerges in the coming months

The following guidelines have been developed to protect you, your relatives, neighbours or other members of the community if you choose to get involved in informal volunteering. They should be read in conjunction with directives from the Australian Government, the ACT Government and the NSW Government.

Understand and reinforce reliable health and safety messages

First and foremost, it is important to take all necessary steps to keep yourself and the community safe and to prevent spread of the virus. Follow local and federal government guidelines on infection control, including instructions on hand washing and physical distancing.

It is vital, for your own health and that of the broader community, that you do not try to help others if you are feeling sick or unwell.

If you are joining a local group, check that they are following and reinforcing these health and safety guidelines. Where you can, reinforce the importance of taking these steps with others in the group.

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volunteeringact.org.au

Follow safe practices

If you are joining a group, they should have some practices and guidelines in place to ensure everyone's safety. The same practices apply if you are helping out as an individual.

Be aware that simple acts such as delivering groceries or medication may not adhere to physical distancing requirements. If dropping off deliveries, call or text ahead and leave items at the front door or in another secure location. You may need to wear protective clothing and gloves and/or carry hand sanitiser, especially if you are handling shopping or money. It is advisable not to enter people's homes.

If providing social contact, there are many ways this can be done without needing face to face contact - such as phone calls, video calls or even letter writing. If you are checking in on someone face to face, ensure you maintain appropriate physical distancing.

Be aware of boundaries when engaging in conversations, avoid oversharing of personal information and ensure that any conversations on the current health emergency are based on reliable government sources.

Understand that you may encounter people who need more professional support than you can provide. It is not your job to solve all problems. Be prepared with information about local community and professional services for people who need more help.

Be clear within your group, and with the individuals you are supporting, about what activities you will be doing and what the expectations and boundaries are. Only do what you are capable of and comfortable with.

Protect and respect people's privacy

Supporting people in your community works best when you start locally with known contacts. Consider how you can reach out to immediate neighbours and people you know through existing networks like sporting and community clubs and associations, schools and education facilities.

Be aware that not everyone will want or accept help in the current circumstances. People may be wary of offers of help from strangers.

It is essential that people's privacy is protected when engaging with groups on social media platforms. Do not disclose online anyone's personal details including name, address, banking details, medical history or any other personal information. Personal details should only be shared privately if absolutely necessary and only with written consent. This includes the personal information of both the people in the community you are seeking to support as well as other volunteers.

Look after yourself

The desire to help others can often override our own self-care. Make sure you are looking after your own physical and mental health and that you know where to go if you need support.

It's OK to take time out from the volunteering experience to look after yourself or family. If you have joined a group,

let the organiser know that you are taking a break from helping out – there is no obligation on you to continue volunteering.

If you are affected mentally or emotionally as a result of volunteers, organisations such as Lifeline (13 11 14) and Beyond Blue (1300 224 636) can provide telephone or online support.

More information on volunteering and on the COVID-19 health emergency is available at volunteeringact.org.au.